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# Chris Martin

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A close-up photograph of a man, Chris Martin, in a workshop. He is wearing a dark blue t-shirt and is focused on his work. He is using a bandsaw to cut a piece of wood. The saw is a large, industrial-looking machine with a blue frame and a thin metal blade. The man's hands are visible, holding the wood steady as it is cut. The background is slightly blurred, showing other parts of the workshop.

# Chris Martin

## Professor profile

Story by Emily Keats  
Photo by Nick Farris  
Design by Joel Seiberling



Being fired from his first professional job was one of the best things that ever happened to him. He spent his childhood making jewelry and playing with fire. Now, Chris Martin is an associate professor of furniture design at Iowa State University.

Four days a week, Martin can be found teaching advanced furniture design classes to students in the integrated studio arts program. When he's not on campus, he's at home in his studio, designing and building pieces for gallery exhibitions and commissions.

Chris Martin has always been a hands-on kind of guy. Born in St. Louis, he moved to Keokuk, Iowa, at the age four. Throughout his youth, he was always busy making things.

"When I started showing an interest toward art [my parents] got me a drafting kit, trying to push me toward a career in engineering," Martin said.

By age 10, Martin was doing projects of his own in his dad's handyman shop, where Martin became fascinated with jewelry making. In high school, he began taking art classes, which he said he enjoyed a great deal. Martin said he is not sure he could ever have actually had a career in art.

"Everything I do has to be practical."

Martin began his college career at the University of Northern Iowa as a freshman studying architecture. After leaving home and escaping his parent's overprotective tendencies, Martin went wild. During his first semester, skipping class, drinking and smoking weed became a way of life.

"I have always been rebellious, I think that's why I am where I am today," Martin said. "I'd otherwise probably be an accountant."

He summarizes his freshman year as "one week of fun. The rest of it was just dumb." Martin said he had to grow up quickly on his own. Looking back, however, he does not see the year as a complete waste. He explained he needed to "sow my wild oats and get it out of my system."

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After realizing UNI was not the right place for him, Martin decided to transfer to Iowa State. Here, he became a serious scholar and met great success in his concentration of jewelry design. Until his junior year, he had no idea a career in studio furniture design even existed. He took his first class in the subject and knew he had found the perfect match.

After graduation, he moved to Old Snowmass, Colo., a town outside of Aspen, with his wife, Tammy, and worked in a cabinet shop. With encouragement from his wife, Martin decided to apply to several graduate design schools and was accepted to the Rhode Island School of Design.

"It's like the Harvard law school of furniture design," he said.

After earning his master's degree, Martin and his wife moved back to Colorado. He began working for a company called Aspen Cabinet and Mill Work. He was in charge of designing, ordering materials and drawing up plans for a 26,000 square foot house being built for the chief executive officer of The North Face. The woodwork alone for the house cost \$4.5 million. The entire house was built out of a wood called "iroko" that was imported from Africa. The wood required a special type of veneer related to poison ivy that caused workers to get sick.

Working with his hands and designing things is Martin's pride and joy. He was bombarded by the details of the project and unable to create anything.

After six stress-filled months, Martin was fired by his assistant manager. Martin's real boss didn't have the courage to do it himself and told Martin "your biggest problem is that you think like an artist."

Martin chose to major in the fine arts because he didn't want to be sitting in front of a desk or drawing table on a daily basis. After being told his creative mind was a problem, Martin said he didn't feel he could work for his boss any longer and was happy to hit the road. He walked down the street

to call his wife from a payphone and tell her the news; she said, "OK, cool!"

Martin said that during his career as a professor of furniture design he's "really thrived." The part of his job he enjoys most is his interaction with students.

"I hope I inspire the students," Martin said. "They inspire me as much [as I do them], if not more."

While living in Colorado, Martin worked in a shop on a mountainside. Sometimes entire weeks passed and the only person he saw was his wife.

"It was really tough to keep inspired, you need input from other people. Here [at Iowa State], the energy is constant and wonderful."

In June of this year, Martin and his wife Tammy will embark on a new journey: the Peace Corps in Ghana, Africa, will become their new home until they return in August 2010.

"It will be interesting to see where my passion is driven after that," Martin said. "We've always wanted to join the Peace Corps."

Martin explained he was urged to experience involvement with the Peace Corps prior to retirement because of all he'll have to offer when he returns.

Tammy will be teaching computer literacy at the high school level while Martin will teach arts to senior secondary students — education between the high school and undergraduate college level.

"I hope the Peace Corps experience will be great," Martin said. "I predict I'll come back and teach with a more international flair."

When Martin returns from Ghana, he says he will see where there is an opportunity to pursue his passions. If that opportunity remains at ISU, he will stay. If not, he will move on. No matter where he goes, one thing is certain — this once-rebellious jewelry maker has become an esteemed designer who is passionate about his profession and giving back to his students and community.